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IV.—SOME PHASES OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN AMERICAN LITERATURE.

There is a fascination in the attempt to define the supernatural, although one is aware of the etymological contradiction implied in the effort. The definition of the *Century Dictionary*, "that which is above or beyond the established course or laws of nature," does not help us much. This definition is best approached by drawing a distinction between the natural and the supernatural which may be epitomized by stating that the former is comprehended, the latter only apprehended. We know, for example, what Poe means when he speaks of the dual self in *William Wilson*, but we do not comprehend the methods by which that duality is to be brought about. In this lack of comprehension lies the attraction of the supernatural. It is one phase of the larger appeal of the romantic, which includes it; and it springs from that ever present demand for what is strange and new which is a part of the nature of man. It is of interest to note that in the nineteenth century, which has demanded an ever increasing exactitude in science, and in America, where commercial standards have always been definite, there has been developed to a remarkable degree a literature dealing with that which cannot be proved or understood.

Broadly speaking, this element has been present in American literature since the publication of Increase Mather's *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* in 1684, if indeed that treatise can lay claim to the name of literature, which may be denied with great certitude to *The Day of Doom*, by his Puritan predecessor,

Michael Wigglesworth. But the works of both Increase and Cotton Mather, whose *Wonders of the Invisible World* is supernatural enough in all conscience in its theme, are so clearly the products of argumentative energy rather than of spiritual fancy that they may be disregarded in the survey. One is tempted to linger over Jonathan Edwards's musings upon the other world, but these are so definitely doctrinal or philosophic that they are also obviously beside our purpose.

As we draw nearer our own day, we come to Philip Freneau, who has been mentioned more than once as a forerunner of Poe; but his treatment of the supernatural in such poems as his *House of Night* is so crude and unconvincing that we may dismiss any suspicion of influence upon the later poet. Freneau was a poet at times; but his queer vision, in which Death is scolded vehemently for his sins by "a portly youth of comely countenance," leaves the reader in such mental confusion that one cannot regret that Freneau turned his attention to themes approaching more closely to reality.

The supernatural in American literature belongs, then, mainly to the nineteenth century, and is to be found in its most artistic form in the lyric, the romance, and the short story, though it has also been introduced into the epic and the drama. It began with the romances of Charles Brockden Brown, and it is significant that the works of the first professed man of letters in this country should contain studies of human beings under supernatural conditions. Brown may be said to have been, for America at least, the pioneer of realistic supernaturalism. His method of securing effects is to retail a series of minute facts or sentiments until the number and the logical sequence of them paralyse the reader's capacity for doubt.

In this he anticipates Poe's method, and in such scenes as the one in *Edgar Huntly*, where the hero finds himself at the bottom of a pit in the darkness, the effect of terror is secured by a series of negations in much the same way as that in which Poe handles similar material. Brown, however, has little direct influence upon Poe or Hawthorne, although the latter gave him a niche in company with Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Fielding in *The Hall of Fantasy*. Brown rarely deals with the spiritual side of the supernatural and it is really only in his treatment of the abnormal that he approaches the subject. The apparently supernatural voice in *Wieland* which, hovering over Clara, guards her from harm, and yet persuades her brother to murder, is explained by the ventriloquism of Carwin; the mystery surrounding Huntly's movements is accounted for by his sleepwalking. In this careful explanation of the mysterious he reminds us of Mrs. Radcliffe, but Brown was little affected in his treatment of the supernatural by the prevailing Gothic Romance in England. Much greater influence in another direction was exerted upon Brown by William Godwin, the author of *Caleb Williams*. The rhetorical effects of both authors are obtained by much the same methods, and the remarkable likeness of the character of Arthur Mervyn to that of Caleb Williams has never been pointed out, so far as the writer is aware. But it was not in his treatment of the supernatural that Brown was affected by Godwin. Brown's novels are thoroughly American in their material, and there is a sense of wildness, of remoteness, which is of great help in the establishment of a romantic atmosphere. The solitary walks of Huntly, the lonely mansion where Constantia Dudley meets Ormond in their death struggle, the entire setting of *Wieland*, are suggestive of the New World.

The supernatural lyric reaches the highest point in America in the work of Poe. Three phases of the supernatural are developed in his poems. We have, first, the description of the spirit world or the suggestion of relation between the spirit world and human beings, as in *Fairyland*, *Al Aaraaf*, *The Raven*, *Israfel*, *Annabel Lee*, *The Sleeper*, *Dreamland*, *For Annie*, and *The Bells*. Second, we find poems in which there is a denial of a natural law as, *The City in the Sea* or *The Valley of Unrest*. A third group includes the supernatural allegory of *The Haunted Palace* or *The Conqueror Worm*. It will be seen that the above list includes nearly all of his greatest poems, although the *To Helen* of 1831 remains without it. Poe's verse confines itself usually to four themes, pride, love, death, and beauty, and the supernatural lends itself well to these themes.

There is very little in Poe's verse of the degradation of the spiritual which is found in his prose. He is not of course always equally happy or significant; the moons in *Fairyland* which

"put out the starlight
With the breath from their pale faces,"

are pure extravaganza. There is not the fine touch of surety in these early poems which appears in those that make up the edition of 1845. In that year, the supernatural motive received one of its best treatments in verse in the revised version of *Israfel*.

"Yes, heaven is thine ; but this
Is a world of sweets and sour ;
Our flowers are merely—flowers,
And the shadow of thy perfect bliss
Is the sunshine of ours."

This is the supernatural in its delicate, suggestive phase.

The Raven, on the other hand, is a most powerful study of the effect of the supernatural upon the man who is predisposed by nature and by his surroundings to the reception of abnormal impressions. The scene is prepared by the tempest outside—the bird is chosen well, and the natural glides into the supernatural so easily that the transition is hardly perceptible. The ending of the poem is especially worthy of study, rising as it does through a climax of action in the 17th stanza:—

“Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting—
 “Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
 Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
 Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
 Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
 Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

to a climax of feeling in the next and last stanza:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
 On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
 And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
 And the lamplight o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
 Shall be lifted,—nevermore!”

It is to be noticed that in this poem there is nothing explained; the only probable explanation is suggested and removed, and the result is an acquiescence in the supernatural as complete as may be. But even with regard to this poem, the word supernatural hardly satisfies us. Poe points not upward, but outward, away from life rather than above it. Abstraction is exchanged for abstraction, human sympathy for his creations there can be none, and the only reason, so far as his readers can see, why his creatures should not die, is that they have never been born.

Poe was not especially fond of allegory, though he wrote in it oftener than is usually stated; but he achieved a supreme result in *The Haunted Palace*, in which the ruin of a soul is portrayed under the guise of the destruction of a building. He also made a supreme failure in the same field in *The Conqueror Worm*, partly on account of the hideous conception, partly through his introduction of an explanation of the allegory in the last stanza.

Poe had a theory about the writing of poetry, and his theory led naturally to the treatment of supernatural themes. He believed that a poem should be short, unified, and should have a tinge of the grotesque about it. By grotesque, he meant abnormal, and abnormal remains the best word with which to describe Poe's poetry. There is no lift in it; no great living truth springs from our hearts, no fact of life rises from our memories, at its call,—it touches neither past nor future, but it is for those moments when all we want is the succession of glorious sounds; and if his range is narrow he carried that range to its supreme height.

In Poe's short stories the supernatural is treated frequently, though not relatively so frequently as in his poems. Of his sixty-eight short stories,¹ twenty-two deal with supernatural themes, and they are usually to be classed among his best works. In nearly all of them the effect tried for and secured is that of terror. A short story is best adapted to produce this effect, for terror is dependent upon apprehension and shock and therefore, strictly speaking, should not form the basis of a romance or novel. When it is used as the motive of a longer work, the shocks, in order not to fail in appeal, must rise con-

¹In making this analysis the "Virginia Edition" of Poe's works, edited by James A. Harrison, New York, 1902, was used.

stantly in their intensity, and consequently they tend to become more and more startling till the effect degenerates by reason of excessive improbability. Poe realized this, and in his longest prose tale, *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, the supernatural is not made the basis of the story but is brought in at the end.

The three phases of the supernatural found in his poems are also represented in his short stories. The description of the spirit world and of the relations of human beings with it, are described in such stories as *Eleonora*, *The Colloquy of Monos and Una*, and *Shadow*; the denial of a natural law is developed in *Berenice* or *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*; *William Wilson*, *Metzengerstein*, *The Masque of the Red Death* are allegorical; and there are two phases of the supernatural not treated in the poems, first, the exaggeration of some natural law or process till it passes beyond the limits of reason, as in *Silence* or *The Tell-Tale Heart*, and, second, the abnormal connection between the seat of life and some external agency, as in *The Oval Portrait*.

Classification, of course, is useful chiefly as a means of calling attention to variety; and this classification can hardly lay claim to the quality of complete exclusiveness. In his short story work Poe used many and various methods. Generalizations, therefore, are dangerous, for often in the treatment of a single theme he is found to differ radically. *Eleonora* and *Berenice*, for example, both deal with sorrow at the death of a beautiful woman, the theme which Poe declared to be the supreme topic of art. The effect of the former is to produce the sensation of beauty of the most ethereal kind—the supernatural element is introduced by suggestion, the message from the spirit world comes like an immaterial sigh from the spirit of his

departed love. Delicacy, abstraction, atmosphere, are the notes most prominent. In *Berenice*, the sensation most definite is that of horror; the means are material, the supernatural element is brought in with a shock not only to the credulity, but also to the good taste of the reader.

For the explanation of this difference in treatment we must turn to a sentence in *Eleonora* itself:

“The question is not yet settled, whether much that is glorious, whether all that is profound—does not spring from disease of thought—from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect.”

When the mood is spiritual, as in *Eleonora*, the effect is artistic, when the mood is simply horrible and revolting, as in *Berenice*, the thought becomes diseased, and the intellect, being subverted to the mood, has no restraining influence. This accounts for the wildness, the undue emotional or moody emphasis in many of Poe's stories, as well as for those lapses from artistic sanity, such as *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, where the supernatural is degraded and the art becomes almost mechanical.

The American who divides with Poe the supremacy in the treatment of the supernatural in English in the last century, is, in many ways, a decided contrast. In Hawthorne, there is no degradation of the supernatural, no forcible dragging of it over the line which separates it from the actual. Instead, that line is made impalpable, the reader is brought into an atmosphere of twilight in which all things may happen, natural or supernatural. Once he surrenders himself to this atmosphere, all else follows naturally enough. He is not constantly reminded by bizarre or grotesque effects that he is in another land—the great though invisible effort of Hawthorne is to make him forget, for a time, that intellectual surrender. The

world into which he has gone has laws of its own, and they are not violated,—with perhaps the single exception, in the *Scarlet Letter*, of the appearance of the symbol “A” in the sky. This is unlike Hawthorne and like Poe, for the laws of the undiscovered country in which Hawthorne rules are that no incident shall be introduced which could not be explained if the reader cared to lose the sense of the beautiful in the intellectual comfort of the prosaic.

Hawthorne takes plenty of time for his introduction. In *Old Esther Dudley* the possibly supernatural appearances in the old house at midnight are prepared for by the heroine’s custom of walking, late at night, to see that all is safe. In *Howe’s Masquerade*, the progress of the ghostly procession of the former governors of Massachusetts is eased by the fact that the guests at the fancy dress ball are already in the costume of bygone days. Poe rarely establishes the atmosphere so carefully as this, though he does so in one of his greatest short stories, *The Masque of the Red Death*. He usually plunges at once into the abnormal, as in *The Tell-Tale Heart* or *The Black Cat*. This abruptness comes, not from lack of art, of course, but from definite intention; for Poe, first among American short story writers, at least, chose to begin at the beginning. From the point of view of the structure of the short story, no criticism can be offered, but for the establishment of the supernatural, there is no doubt that time is needed.

Hawthorne evades the responsibility for the supernatural at times by introducing it as a tradition. One of the most interesting examples of this, which shows also his thorough knowledge of New England’s past, lies in an incident in *The House of the Seven Gables*. Colonel Pyncheon has been instrumental in having an old man,

Matthew Maule, persecuted as a wizard, and has taken some property which belonged to Maule. Maule curses him on the scaffold, prophesying that "God will give him blood to drink." Of the death of Colonel Pyncheon, Hawthorne writes:—

"There is a tradition, only worth alluding to as lending a tinge of superstitious awe to a scene perhaps gloomy enough without it, that a voice spoke loudly among the guests, the tones of which were like those of old Matthew Maule, the executed wizard,—"God hath given him blood to drink.'"

Hawthorne derived this idea from Robert Calef's *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, which was published in 1700, as a reply to Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*. At the trial of Sarah Good, one of those accused of witchcraft, Calef tells us, one of the magistrates, Noyes, urged her to confess, saying she was a witch. She replied:—

"You are a liar,—I am no more a witch than you are a wizard and if you take away my life, God will give you blood to drink." ¹

The fact that one of the judges, Mr. Hathorne, was a direct ancestor of the novelist, makes the incident even more interesting. It is, however, only one of many which show the essentially native quality of Hawthorne's genius. He was the logical outcome of the Puritan's interest in the supernatural, and he could have been developed only in New England.

The supernatural is not Hawthorne's most frequent note, which is, of course, moral allegory. If we take as a basis for discussion his three most important collections of short stories, *Twice Told Tales*, *Mosses from an Old*

¹ P. 219, ed. Boston, 1828.

Manse, and *The Snow Image and Other Twice Told Tales*, we find that only nineteen of the seventy-nine deal with supernatural themes. We find four of the five phases of the supernatural that were manifest in Poe; the contact with the spirit world is treated in *The Gray Champion* or *Howe's Masquerade*, the denial or reversal of a natural law is described in *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment*, the supernatural allegory is developed in *The Bosom Serpent* or *The Minister's Black Veil*, and the abnormal connection between the seat of life and some external agency appears in *The Birthmark* or *Rappaccini's Daughter*. The exaggeration of some natural law or process until it passes into the supernatural seems not to have been used by Hawthorne.

The supernatural tinges all of Hawthorne's longer works, including an interesting series of unfinished romances, which have at their bases, supernatural ideas. About the beginning of 1855, Hawthorne conceived the idea of an English romance,¹ based on the return of an American heir to an English estate. In August, he visited Smithell's Hall in Bolton le Moors, which boasted a legend concerning a bloody footstep, and from that time on, the idea of a bloody footstep upon the threshold of a hall, having some connection with the missing heir, becomes a part of the romance. In the first form in which the romance was outlined, to which the title of *The Ancestral Footstep* has been given, it is not clear just what the cause of the footstep is. Hawthorne at different times states different ideas he is going to work out,—for the romance is simply a collection of preparatory sketches,—

¹ See *English Note-Books*, "Riverside Edition" of Hawthorne's works, Vol. VII, p. 564; also G. P. Lathrop's Introduction to *The Ancestral Footstep*, Vol. XI, p. 434.

but the footstep is usually the result of a quarrel between two brothers who love the same woman. Sometimes the guilty party makes the footstep, sometimes the innocent one. Usually the second brother makes it, flees to America, and gives rise to the family from which the claimant descends. In *Doctor Grimshawe's Secret*, we have the almost complete form of a romance based on the same general idea—that of a claimant returning from America to the home of his ancestors. There is here also a bloody footstep—with varying explanations; one that it was made by a Saxon thane who fought against the Norman baron on his own threshold, one that it was made by a fugitive who was slain in the Wars of the Roses, one that it was made by a Protestant during Queen Mary's reign,¹ and again that it was made by a Puritan, who had trodden in the blood of King Charles and had been expelled by his family in consequence. In this story, we have introduced a second supernatural motive, that of the elixir of eternal life, which is the object of Dr. Grimshawe's experiment, but which remains definitely in the background.

In *Septimius Felton*, the main thread of the other stories becomes a hint. The romance of the bloody footstep becomes a legend told by one of the characters, Sibyl Dacy, of a scientist in England who had discovered the elixir of life and who needed the life of a being dear to him to give as a recompense to Nature for his life, which she is to spare. He kills a young girl, and his footstep is bloody as he carries her into the hall. The main theme becomes that of the drink which is to give immortal life, and in the moment of accomplishment the liquid is spilled by Sibyl Dacy to save Felton's life.

¹ This explanation was the one given by the owners of Smithell's Hall. See *English Note-Books*, "Riverside Edition," Vol. VII, p. 562.

In the *Dolliver Romance*, which was to have been the final form, and of which only three chapters exist, the bloody footstep and the American claimant shrink to a mere mention, the story of the elixir of life is everything and is carried on by totally different characters, an old apothecary and a little girl. Hawthorne's course in this series of romances is typical, for it is a progress from the theme which must be treated realistically to that which can be treated idealistically, and from a particular theme to a universal one.

A comparison between Poe and Hawthorne usually becomes a contrast. Both of them, however, realized well the necessity of mingling the appeal of the concrete with the appeal of the abstract, and while, as might have been expected, they make that appeal differently, the origin of their effort is the same. They knew that sensation is not necessary to belief, that even the possibility of a sensation is not necessary to a reader's belief in the creations of a literary artist. They also knew, however, that a belief in the possibility of at least the elements out of which a sensation is composed is a powerful adjunct to a writer's power of appeal. We dream of impossibilities often, but the impossibility always lies in the combination of elements of motion or of sensation, never in the elements themselves. We dream, let us say, that we are floating about three feet above the ground without visible means of propulsion. Now we often do move about three feet above the ground, but in real life something, a carriage or a car, propels us. What is wanting in the dream is one element; that is all. Perhaps it is this reality of the elements out of which they are composed that secures the belief in dreams while they last, and it is this state of mental belief that the artist of the supernatural strives to awaken in his reader.

This belief is not of course sufficient; there must also be elements of interest. One may believe in the possibility of the sensations in a story and yet may remain perfectly passive and irresponsive on account of one's lack of interest in the sensations. To vitalize the sensations, there must be present an emotion both in the writer and in the reader. This emotion may be conjured up in the reader by the memory of a sensation just as well as by the sensation itself, but in any case there must be something concrete for the emotion to center upon. That is why the figure of the pestilence in *The Masque of the Red Death* is so powerful, why the voices of the dead multitude in *Shadow* produce so great an effect, why even the teeth of *Berenice*, horrible as they are, fasten emotion to sensation and fix them both in the memory. It is this grip of the concrete also which accounts for the longing we have to know *what* is behind the *Minister's Black Veil*, which explains the hold that the mystery of *The Birthmark* has upon our sympathies, and which accounts in large measure for the appeal of the supreme creation of our native romance, *The Scarlet Letter*. Many and various are the thoughts it suggests, the sidelights it throws upon human nature, the ways in which it links the supernatural to the natural.

Hawthorne suggests delicately the effect the letter had upon Hester Prynne, upon Arthur Dimmesdale, and upon the people, and then in the following passage describes a dramatic relation between the sinner, the effect of the sin and the symbol of the sin, unsurpassed in English literature:—

“But that first object of which Pearl seemed to become aware was—shall we say it?—the scarlet letter on Hester's bosom! One day as her mother stooped over the cradle, the infant's eyes had been caught by the glimmering of the golden embroidery about the letter; and, putting up her little hand, she grasped at it, smiling, not doubtfully, but with a decided gleam

that gave her face the look of a much older child. Then, gasping for breath, did Hester Prynne clutch the fatal token, instinctively endeavoring to tear it away ; so infinite was the torture inflicted by the intelligent touch of Pearl's baby hand. Again, as if her mother's agonized gesture were meant only to make sport for her, did little Pearl look into her eyes and smile." ¹

However akin Hawthorne and Poe were in their realization of the importance of a concrete symbol, the effect of their treatment of the supernatural must remain vastly different. Reading Hawthorne is like entering from the bright sunlight into a darkened house. The outlines of all things are softened, the relations of all things are obscured in the twilight, and if the sunlight does come through the blinds in scattered rays, it seems only to accentuate the general gloom. Reading Poe, on the other hand, is like descending through a trap door into a subterranean apartment, lighted by the flare of a dripping torch which throws grotesque shadows that melt weirdly into the unlighted corners. Everything is distorted, and the path that is left behind and the path still to be travelled are alike hidden in hopeless night.

In great contrast to its treatment in the lyric and the short story, has been the appearance of the supernatural in the epic. Its most noteworthy appearance was in *Hiawatha*, where Longfellow introduces it in the form of a legend, not apologizing for it by either word or attitude, but assuming its existence as part of the life of a primitive race. The ghosts introduced into Hiawatha's tent are visible at times, and at other times invisible. When they first appear,

"From their aspect and their garments,
Strangers seemed they in the village,"

¹ It is interesting to remember that yellow and red are colors which the child would have first noticed.

while at the end of their visit

“ Hiawatha heard a rustle
 As of garments trailing by him,
 Heard the curtain of the doorway
 Lifted by a hand he saw not,
 Felt the cold breath of the night air,
 For a moment saw the starlight,
 But he saw the ghosts no longer,
 Saw no more the wandering spirits
 From the kingdom of Ponemah,
 From the land of the Hereafter.”

The supernatural in *Hiawatha*, however, is nowhere brought into contact with reality; it remains one element in the figurative conception of the entire poem. It is not explained, because it does not ask belief, and it remains almost as objective and as much a matter of course as “the fearful guest” of the *Skeleton in Armor*, whose supernatural quality is forgotten almost as soon as the poem begins. Even where the supernatural is the warp and woof of the story, as in the *Ballad of Carmilhan*, the story is told by some one who assumes responsibility for the truth of the supernatural appearance. There the ghostly ship which draws the “Valdemar” to her ruin may have been an hallucination; it all rests upon the testimony of the sole survivor. In any case, the supernatural remains of the kind which is easily put on and off.

Longfellow’s most successful attempt at the treatment of supernatural themes is to be found in *The Mother’s Ghost*, a translation of a Danish ballad, it is true, but one in which he has caught the very spirit of the old English ballad. A man has married a second time, and his six children are badly treated by their stepmother. The stark simplicity of the ballad at its best rings in such lines as:—

“In the evening late they cried with cold ;
The mother heard it under the mould.
The woman heard it the earth below ;
‘To my little children I must go.’
She standeth before the Lord of all ;
‘And may I go to my children small?’”
.
.
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“She girded up her sorrowful bones,
And rifted the walls and the marble stones,

As through the village she flitted by,
The watch dogs howled aloud to the sky.”

The supernatural element, too, is much more convincing than in the other poems of Longfellow. It remains of the same objective kind, but in this poem a great passion becomes personified in a supernatural appearance and waives belief as an unnecessary test. To those who can believe in a mother's love hovering over her children after death, the phenomenal appearance of the mother becomes a detail. The presence of the great emotion disarms our judgment, also, and takes the place of that element of terror which Poe used so frequently to suspend the action of our reasoning faculties. With the supernatural, our reasoning faculties have little to do. Therefore, when in his drama of *Giles Corey* Longfellow makes the whole play a controversy as to the existence of the supernatural, he destroys the illusion which is the life of the literary treatment of the other-world.

Poe's influence abroad, especially in France and England, was great. His influence in his own country was marked, and nowhere more so than in his immediate successor in the field of the short story, Fitz-James O'Brien. This talented Irishman, whose work was done on this side of the Atlantic, was definitely influenced, even to the extent of showing verbal similarities, by the work of his

predecessor. He developed, to a great extent, the pseudo-scientific supernaturalism of Poe in his most famous story, *The Diamond Lens*, and in his terrible *Wonder-smith*, but perhaps his most interesting supernatural study is his story of *What Was It?* It belongs to that phase of the supernatural in which there is a deliberate denial of some natural law. The method employed to produce the effect, which is attained by the failure of one or more of the senses to react when brought into contact with a phenomenon, is one frequently used in the establishment of the supernatural. The remarkable power of O'Brien's conception rests in his choice of the sense that is to fail to act.

The ghosts with which our literature is stocked usually fall into one group, those which can be seen but fail to appeal to any other sense. Their authors have probably reasoned that the effect of terror was greater on account of this lack of appeal. They failed to realize that the belief in the possibility of the appearance was weakened by the failure of each added sense to operate, and that the supernatural is most effective when all the senses may act, except one. O'Brien may have reasoned this out or he may have arrived at the result by the sheer force of genius, but in any case he has arrived at the result. In the story of *What Was It?* after preparing the way by a discussion of the most effective methods of producing terror, he tells of a mysterious something which drops on the chest of the hero while he is lying in bed awaiting sleep. After a frightful struggle, he subdues "the thing" and is horrified to find, after he turns on the light, that he can see nothing, although he holds his captor in his grasp. He can hear the rapid breathing and feel the writhing of the strange being, but to the eyes of the

inmates of the house, who have been awakened by his cries, he is holding nothing. He proves to them that he is not mistaken by dropping the creature on the bed, where it makes the impression of a small human being. The visitor finally dies of starvation, as no food can be found which it will eat.

The effectiveness of this story is truly remarkable. The methods are the methods of Poe, the opening sentences are strikingly like the beginning of *The Black Cat*, but the conception is O'Brien's. How it was used afterwards, in De Maupassant's *Le Horla*, has been pointed out by Professor Brander Matthews, but in unity of treatment and in realism of detail, the Irish-American surpasses the great Frenchman.

It would be interesting to trace other direct influences of Poe in American literature, but after all, his indirect influence was most important. He taught the lesson that the selection of romantic material combined with realistic treatment is surest of popular appeal; and while this method is not his only one, it is the method which has the greatest number of imitators. It is this method which secures our interest in F. Marion Crawford's powerful story of *The Upper Berth*, to mention only one of his supernatural studies. Here the ghost which forces its way into the stateroom seems to affect all the senses but that of hearing, and the terror is increased rather than diminished by the fact that the porthole must be opened for its passage.

Hawthorne founded no such definite school. His method was not so easy to imitate, for it is not easy even to define it, and others chiefly remind us of him on account of the refinement, of the atmospheric quality of their treatment of the supernatural. Certain stories of

Mr. Henry James in his earliest period, like *A Romance of Certain Old Clothes*, have a flavor of Hawthorne, but his later and most powerful story of the supernatural, *The Turn of the Screw*, is not like Hawthorne's work in the least.

With our modern story writers, however, it is only occasionally that the supernatural receives treatment. Mr. Thomas Nelson Page, Mrs. Wharton, Mrs. Freeman, and others have achieved success in it in certain of their short stories; and Mrs. Wharton, at least, in her powerful story of *The Lady's Maid's Bell*, has proved that when a romantic theme is treated by an artist who deals usually with familiar life the descent into the easier regions is likely to be a success.

For, after all, we cannot claim for the supernatural the distinction of supreme difficulty. Its appeal is quick and, by the very nature of its domain, its laws even now are not strictly codified. In the hands of a great master, it satisfies the longing that springs from the dissatisfaction with daily duties and the hard, cold facts of life; in the hands of the hack, it covers a multitude of sins. Yet, though not the greatest phase of our native literature, it remains the one perhaps most apparent to foreign critics; for it so happened that the most intense and the most delicate of our literary artists, each in his own way, chose to lift it to a plane unmatched during their time in any country where English is spoken. Every phase of the supernatural in American literature is of interest mainly as leading to Poe and Hawthorne or as developing from them; for, so far as we are concerned, they have still said its last great word.

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